



## Supporting Children and Youth with Challenging Behavior

Presented by Dr. Jessica Simacek

This module, provides a comprehensive overview of understanding and supporting children who exhibit challenging behaviors. It emphasizes a non-judgmental, purpose-driven lens, highlighting that all behavior communicates a need and serves a function.

### WHAT IS CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR?

Challenging behavior is common in childhood and can include aggression, self-injury, elopement, and tantrums. These behaviors often reflect unmet needs or difficulty communicating. Some behaviors are developmentally typical, persistent or severe behaviors that limit a child's safety, learning, or quality of life require intervention and support.

Children exhibiting challenging behavior are at greater risk for repeated emergency interventions, long-term behavior persistence, and reduced quality of life. Dismissing concerns with "they'll grow out of it" undermines evidence-based approaches and delays support to the child and their family.

### WHY EARLY SUPPORT MATTERS

When challenging behaviors continue over time, they can lead to more serious outcomes. For example, children may end up in the emergency room for self-injury or miss out on learning opportunities. These issues don't usually go away on their own, so early intervention is key.

### BARRIERS FAMILIES FACE

Even when families know their child needs help, getting that help isn't always easy. Some of the biggest challenges include:

- Not enough trained professionals, especially in rural areas
- Long waitlists and the need to travel far for appointments
- High turnover among providers, which affects consistency of care
- Systemic racism and bias, making it harder for families of color or those who speak other languages to get the support they need
- Lack of options for children with more intense needs, who are sometimes turned away from services because their behavior is seen as "too difficult"

These barriers can leave families feeling frustrated and isolated, making things worse for the child.

### CONTINUUM OF CARE AND COMMUNITY-BASED SUPPORT

A multi-tiered continuum of care aims to intervene early and prevent escalation. Support must be community-based, integrated, data-informed, and culturally responsive. Wraparound planning and inter-agency coordination are critical to help families navigate systems and ensure consistency across providers.

## POSITIVE BEHAVIOR SUPPORT (PBS) AND MTSS FRAMEWORK

PBS operates within a Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS):

- Tier 1 (Universal): Proactive strategies for all children
- Tier 2 (Targeted): Additional support for children at risk
- Tier 3 (Intensive): Individualized interventions informed by Functional Behavior Assessments (FBA)

Even at the highest level of support, children should still continue to get all the benefits from the lower levels. The goal is to help them succeed and, when possible, move back to lower levels of support.

## WORKING TOGETHER IN THE COMMUNITY

Supporting children with challenging behavior takes more than one provider or one program. Families need a team around them. This includes:

- Ongoing care and follow-up (not just a one-time appointment)
- Providers trained in evidence-based practices
- Systems that work together so families don't fall through the cracks
- Culturally respectful care that fits each family's background and values

## 3-TERM CONTINGENCY: THE ABCs

Effective intervention relies on understanding the three-term contingency:

- Antecedent: What happened right before the behavior?
- Behavior: What did the child do?
- Consequence: What happened right after?

The information we gain from completing assessments, like functional behavior assessment, helps us form individualized positive behavior interventions customized to the child's specific strengths and needs. We use patterns observed and reported antecedents ('triggers' in the environment) and consequences (events that occur immediately following the behavior) to best customize how we can change the environment to support the child in the positive behavior intervention plan. We also look at things like whether the child is sick, tired, or going through a hard time—factors that can influence behavior even if they're not obvious.

Most behaviors happen for a reason. Common reasons include getting attention, avoiding something unpleasant, getting access to something they want, or simply reacting to how they feel physically or emotionally. When we know the reason, we can teach new, more positive ways for children to get their needs met.

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Understanding behavior through a non-judgmental, individualized, and function-based lens—while addressing systemic and access barriers—is essential to supporting children and youth with challenging behavior. Equitable, coordinated, and evidence-based supports help children thrive at home, in school, and in their communities.